

Research Report

Hamilton County, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and the Exit Interview

Prepared by:



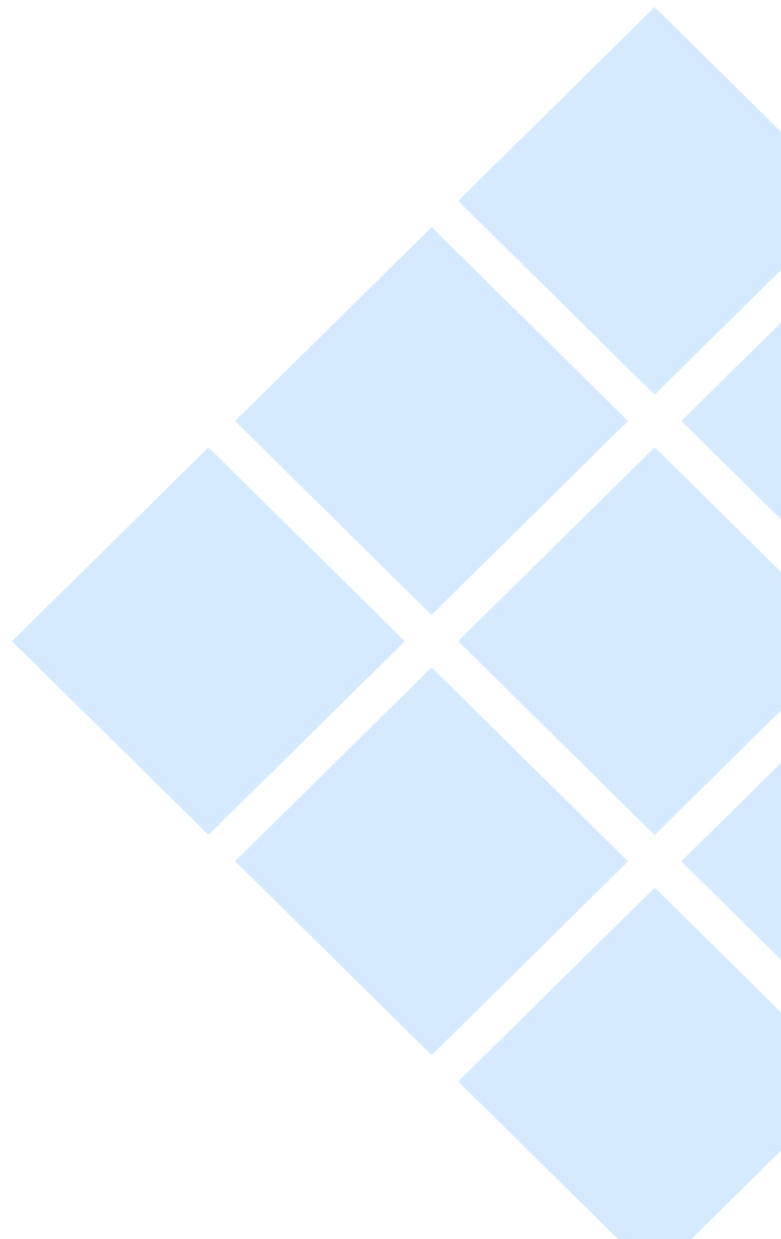
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JFS and the Exit Interview/Survey

When Hamilton County, Ohio Job and Family Services (JFS) introduced its innovative Pay for Performance system in 1998, they believed that it would help reduce employee turnover. As is the case with human services agencies across the county, JFS had been experiencing high levels of turnover, particularly among its Children's Services Workers. The PFP system was expected to improve the retention rate of the better-performing employees while providing a disincentive for the weaker performers.

Although innovative pay practices may play a significant role in improving the retention rate of the high achievers, turnover in the human services workforce is driven by a number of factors, requiring a variety of remedial strategies. Although high caseloads, low pay, and employee burnout are often cited as being among the major contributors, the specific causes of high turnover vary across organizations. If properly administered and utilized, the Exit Interview/Survey (EIS) can provide organizations with valuable information about the specific reasons for employee turnover.

For the past several years, JFS has conducted a brief exit interview with departing employees, but they do not believe that their process has provided the quality of information they need to design and implement additional strategies that will have a major impact. As part of the grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, JFS requested CPS Human Resources Services (CPS) to survey the EIS literature and make specific recommendations for improvement.

Literature Review

Most of what has been written about EIS in the past thirty years can be divided into two categories: academic research and practical applications.

The academic research has largely focused on validity and reliability of EIS results. Obviously, EIS data is useful as a management tool only if the responses provided by departing employees accurately and truthfully reflect the real reasons why they are leaving the organization. One study from the late 1960s revealed that only 41 percent of employees who were surveyed three months after terminating their employment identified the same reasons for leaving as they did during the exit interview conducted at the time of their departure. In fact, the 14 percent who had indicated during the exit interview that they were leaving "for no specific reason," all identified a specific reason during the follow up survey.

Much of the more recent research has been devoted to identifying those factors that impact the validity and reliability of employee responses in the EIS process. Some of the major findings from a number of different studies suggest that employees are more likely to give candid feedback when:

- They are provided with assurances that their reasons for leaving are kept confidential and aggregated in summary reports.
- They are offered specific assurances that they will be protected from supervisory retaliation, such as negative references and poor treatment of coworkers who stay behind.
- They believe that the organization has fixed past problems systematically identified in the EIS process.
- They believe the reasons for leaving the organization can be provided in a non-confrontational way (i.e., some employees are unwilling to confront any management representative with what they disliked about the organization, but would be willing to provide that information in an anonymous survey or to a neutral third party paid by the organization).

The research also suggests that some employees need time to sort out the reasons that brought them to the decision to leave an organization. Sometimes the real reasons may not surface until several weeks after departure.

Much of the practical applications of EIS are based on the experiences of Human Resource (HR) practitioners and consultants. In reviewing trade journals and HR publications, we found that there is a general consensus on much of the practical advice:

- A properly conducted EIS can provide very valuable information about the reasons why employees leave organizations. However, many organizations simply collect the data, and fail to analyze and use it. EIS data should be shared with top executives for use as an organizational self assessment and in overall strategic planning.
- Employees participating in the EIS process must be assured of the confidentiality of their responses, particularly if exit interviews are conducted. Many employees are concerned about “burning their bridges,” knowing that they might seek reemployment in the future. They are also concerned about receiving negative job references, and possible reprisal against friends who still work for the organization.
- Organizations should have a formal EIS policy that is uniformly applied. The EIS should be an integral part of the formal “outprocessing”¹ that is expected by all departing employees. Just as employees expect to turn in their keys, identification cards, and laptop, they should understand that the organization values their feedback in the EIS process.
- Exit interviews and exit surveys each have their own specific advantages and disadvantages. The interview may provide richer information if a skilled interviewer asks probing questions and offers a setting where the departing employee can be formally thanked for their contributions to the organization. Although the interview

¹ We use the term, “outprocessing,” to mean the formal procedure an organization uses to officially conclude the employment relationship of a departing employee. Steps include: employees returning equipment (keys, ID cards, laptops); signing of “non-compete” agreements or any other formal documents; the completion of the exit interview; and any formal recognition of service contributions.

usually has a higher response rate than the survey, the accuracy of the information may be compromised if the employee feels intimidated or simply chooses to remain passive in the process. Survey responses are easier to objectively quantify and track over time. Their greatest advantages are the assurance of confidentiality the process can provide, and the lower relative costs.

JFS' Current EIS Process

As part of their formal outprocessing, JFS gives terminating employees an “Exit Interview Questionnaire” (see Attachment 1, page H-6). Normally, this occurs during the last few days of employment. Some of the employees fill out the questionnaire during their outprocessing visit to the Human Resources Office, and some take it to be completed and returned at a later time. Although the employee is not required to fill out the survey, JFS estimates that almost all of them complete it (90 to 95 percent). Most employees also provide verbal feedback to the HR staff person who handles the outprocessing. JFS tells employees that a copy of the questionnaire will be sent to their former supervisor and Section manager.

Although the questionnaire asks employees to use a one-to-five scale to rate eleven factors found on the job (e.g., training, supervision, recognition, salary, benefits, etc.), JFS has made no attempt to summarize or aggregate the data for top management review. The questionnaire also asks employees why they are leaving the agency, but most responses fall into the broad, generalized categories like “other employment,” “retirement”, or “personal reasons.”

Recommendations for Process Improvement

Although JFS appears to be gathering some very useful information regarding the reasons for employee departures, we believe their exit-survey process could be improved by implementing the following recommendations:

- JFS should explicitly inform employees that providing their name on the questionnaire is optional. Research clearly shows that many employees desire to keep their responses anonymous and confidential.
- Copies of the questionnaire should not be sent to the former supervisor and Section manager. Research shows that many employees will not respond candidly if they believe that their former supervisors will see their responses. Responses should be provided in a summary report to top management.
- We believe that more detailed and useful information could be obtained by making minor revisions to the form. Our revised form is attached (Attachment 2, page H-8), and includes the following recommended changes:
 - Questions 2 through 12 on the questionnaire should be introduced with the statement “Please rate your satisfaction with the following on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=Low to 5=High). As currently stated, the employee could be responding to

the “importance” of the factors, the “quality” of the factors, or their “satisfaction” with the factors.

- The wording of several items should be clarified:
 - a. Item 7 – We changed “Cultural environment” to “Organizational Support.” As currently stated, we believe the distinction between “Cooperative, friendly work environment” (Item 6) and “Cultural environment” is unclear.
 - b. Item 11 – We changed “Importance of salary” to “Salary.” We believe the intent is to find out how satisfied employees are with their salary, not how important salary is to them.
 - c. Item 12 – We changed “Importance of benefits” to “Benefits.” We believe the intent is to find out how satisfied employees are with their benefits, not how important benefits are to them.
 - d. Question 13 should be reworded to allow employees to choose from a list of specific reasons for leaving the agency, (e.g., Other Employment, Relocation, Retirement, Personal Reasons, etc.).
- The underlying reasons for employees’ decisions to terminate employment should be sought in a way that is more comprehensive and quantifiable. A new question could be added, such as: “Please check each factor below that influenced your decision to leave the agency.” The choices could include: Salary, Benefits, Advancement opportunities, Training, Performance appraisals, Lack of organizational appreciation, Lack of organizational support, Work-related injury, Work-related illness, Work-related stress, Retirement, Moving, Quality of supervision, Hours worked, Workload (caseload size), Safety factors. Other reasons particularly pertinent to the Children’s Services Workers would be: Court-related issues, Paperwork, Complexity of rules and policy, Clients, and “Burnout.”
- To better focus the responses, an additional question could be added asking employees to identify the top three reasons of those checked in the preceding question.
- The responses from items 2 through 12 should be aggregated and provided in a summary report to top management, as well as to Section managers.
- Since the turnover rate for the Children’s Services Worker classification is higher than for other classifications, we would recommend conducting a formal exit interview with a sample of those leaving the classification. We would recommend that the interview be conducted by someone the employee believes would keep the results confidential, (i.e., to be reported only in aggregate terms). Conducting a telephone interview two or three weeks after the departure has the advantage of allowing the employee to respond more reflectively than emotionally. JFS may also wish to consider using a random sample of Children’s Services Workers or may prefer to sample only the high-performers. The advantage of the later approach is that the focus would be on what JFS can do to retain the high-achievers.

- Given the already high response rate for the exit survey, we believe that the current policy of providing the questionnaire as part of the formal outprocessing is working well and should be continued.

Attachment 1 – JFS Child Welfare Worker Exit Questionnaire



EIN# _____

Exit Interview Questionnaire

NAME: _____

UNIT: _____

POSITION: _____

SUPERVISOR: _____

LENGTH OF TIME WITH HCJFS: _____

1. Will your next job be in a related field?

☐

Yes

☐

No

What is your next job? _____

Who is your next employer? _____

Please rank the following on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Low 5 = High)

		Low				High
2.	Training	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Quality of supervision	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Utilization of my skills	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Recognition of my achievements	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Cooperative, friendly work environment	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Cultural environment	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Overall level of communication	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Communication with co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Communication with supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Importance of salary	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Importance of benefits	1	2	3	4	5

13. Why are you leaving the agency? _____

14. What would have encouraged you to remain with the agency? _____

15. What part of your job did you enjoy most? _____

16. What part of your job did you enjoy least? _____

17. Would you recommend HCJFS as a potential employer to a friend?

☐

Yes

☐

No

Additional comments: _____

Signature of Exiting Employee: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your feedback. Please return your completed form to Human Resources.

Attachment 2 – Revised JFS Child Welfare Worker Exit Questionnaire



EIN# _____

Exit Interview Questionnaire

NAME (optional): _____

UNIT: _____ POSITION (classification or working title): _____

SUPERVISOR (optional): _____ LENGTH OF TIME WITH HCJFS (optional): _____

1. Will your next job be in a related field? _____

☐

Yes

☐

No

What is your next job? _____

Who is your next employer? _____

Please rate your satisfaction with the following on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Low 5 = High)

		Low				High
2.	Training	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Quality of supervision	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Utilization of my skills	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Recognition of my achievements	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Cooperative, friendly work environment	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Organizational support	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Overall level of communication	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Communication with co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Communication with supervisor	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Salary	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Benefits	1	2	3	4	5

13. Why are you leaving the agency? _____

a. Other employment _____

b. Medical reasons _____

c. Relocation _____

d. Return to school _____

e. Retirement _____

f. Personal _____

Comments: _____

14. Please check each factor that influenced your decision to leave JFS:

a. Salary _____

b. Upper management _____

c. Benefits _____

d. Lack of organizational support _____

e. Advancement opportunities _____

f. Lack of organizational appreciation _____

g. Retirement _____

h. Illness _____

i. Moving _____

j. Work-related stress/burnout _____

k. Hours worked _____

l. Performance appraisals _____

m. Workload _____

n. Client _____

o. Safety factors _____

p. Paperwork _____

q. Training _____

r. Complexity of regulations & policy _____

s. Supervision _____

t. Court-related issues _____

Comments: _____

15. Of the reasons you checked in number 14, please select your top three (by letter):

Reason 1: _____

Reason 2: _____

Reason 3: _____

16. What would have encouraged you to remain with the agency?

17. What part of your job did you enjoy most?

18. What part of your job did you enjoy least?

19. Would you recommend HCJFS as a potential employer to a friend? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Comments: _____

Additional comments: _____

Signature of Exiting Employee (optional): _____ Date: (optional) _____

Thank you for your feedback. Please return your completed form to Human Resources. Your comments are kept confidential and aggregated with other responses in summary reports.